Case Study: Washington, D.C.: A Map for Congestion

In the 1960s, transportation officials in and around Washington, D.C. devised an ambitious, comprehensive transportation plan for the metropolitan region that called for additional transit, the construction of high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes to encourage carpooling, and 14 new highways. Officials built the rail transit system and carpool lanes, while deciding to forego nearly 1,500 miles of highways in the original plan. As a result, congestion in Washington, D.C. is now second only to Los Angeles. As D.C. demonstrated, failing to build new highways to keep up with growth, is a road map for congestion.

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Background

In the 1960s, officials in Washington, D.C., and the surrounding suburbs of Virginia and Maryland devised an ambitious, comprehensive transportation plan for the metropolitan region. The plan called for construction of

- a world-class underground rail system
- high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes to encourage carpooling
- 14 new highways

In the 1970s, however, regional leaders made a conscious decision to limit road building and to focus more resources on the Metrorail transit system and HOV lanes. As a result, 13 highway projects—representing nearly 1,500 lane miles—were dropped from the original transportation plan. What has this loss of additional highway capacity meant for the nation's capital?

The lesson of Washington, D.C. is that growing communities cannot afford not to build new roads.

The Myth

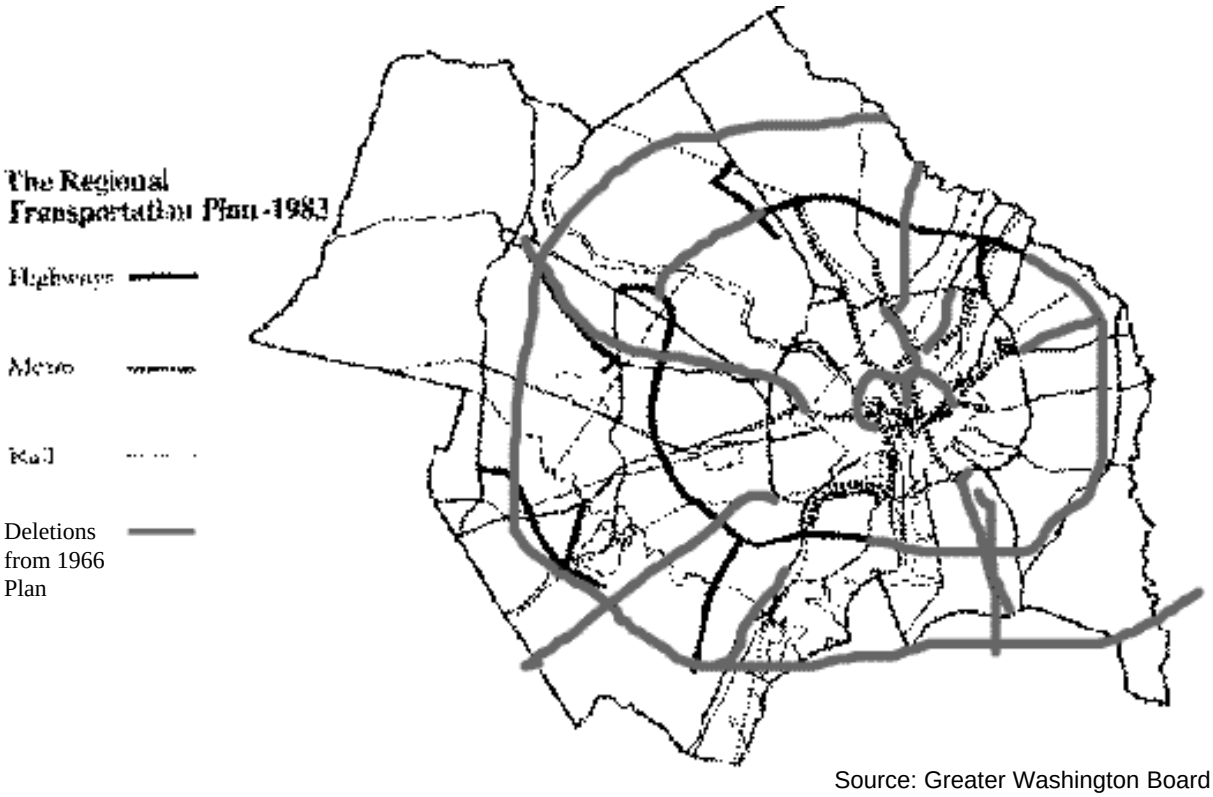
By investing in transit and other transportation alternatives, growing cities can eliminate the need for additional highway capacity.

The Facts

At the expense of highways, Washington's rates of transit use and carpooling rank among the nation's highest.

- Washington's transit investments have paid remarkable dividends. Washington has the second highest rail ridership and the fourth highest bus ridership in the country. Overall, Washington ranks third in the percentage of commuters who use transit (13.4%).

Washington, D.C.'s Map for Congestion



Source: Greater Washington Board of Trade

- Washington ranks first in the nation in percentage of workers who carpool (16%). This ranking is partially due to the HOV lanes, but also is a result of the large number of federal employees in downtown D.C. who receive preferential parking and other incentives for carpooling.

Despite remarkably high levels of transit use and carpooling, Washington has the second worst congestion in the U.S. according to the Texas Transportation Institute (1999).

- Washington's failure to invest in additional highway capacity has left residents with the second longest average commute in the nation (29.5 minutes), 30 percent higher than the national average.
- Congestion costs Washingtonians dearly in terms of wasted time and fuel. Washington's $1,260 annual per-driver congestion cost ranks second nationally (TTI 1999).

Our Position

The lesson of Washington, D.C., is that growing communities cannot afford not to build new roads. While it is clear from past experience that no single strategy can adequately address the problems of traffic congestion, a balanced, comprehensive approach can lessen the stifling gridlock found on many highways.

Such an approach needs to include improving the convenience and safety of transit. At the same time, we need to use the roads we already have in the most efficient way possible. Investing in smart-road technologies, such as synchronized traffic lights, computerized systems to route traffic around congested areas, reversible commuter lanes, and movable barriers that add road capacity during peak hours of travel, will help. Nevertheless, additional lanes and new roads are needed in some locations to meet growing transportation demand.

Endnote

Texas Transportation Institute. (1999). *Urban Roadway Congestion Annual Report 1999*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University.